DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 390 TM 820 256

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TITLE The California High School Proficiency Examination Six Years After Implementation.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (66th, New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Standards; *Basic Skills; *Educational Attainment; *Equivalency Tests; High School Equivalency Programs; Longitudinal Studies; Secondary Education; State Standards; Student Certification; *Testing Programs
IDENTIFIERS *California High School Proficiency Examination; *Early Graduation

ABSTRACT

In 1975 California became the first state to offer an "early exit" proficiency test from high school to persons 16 years of age or older (California law normally requires young persons to attend school until they reach 18 or graduate regularly from high school). More than 87,000 persons have passed the early exit examination; a pass rate of approximately 44 percent. The test was originally intended to serve the "bright but bored" students who may be performing well, but wish to move on to college early, and "borderline dropouts," marginal attenders and achievers who are disaffected with school but have gained or can gain a sound command of the basic skills before taking the test. This summary of the six years of implementation includes discussions of a longitudinal view of examinee characteristics, the long-term institutional reaction to the examination, changing test characteristics, and the relationship of the California High School Proficiency Examination to other testing programs. (CM)

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THE CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION

SIX YEARS AFTER IMPLEMENTATION

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MARCH 1982

TM 820256

Prepared for the American Educational Research Association

Annual Meeting, 1982

California High School Proficiency Examination

Six Years After Implementation

Introduction

In 1975 California became the first state to offer an "early exit" proficiency test from high school to persons 16 years of age or older (under California law, young persons normally must attend school until they reach 18 or graduate regularly from high school). Since then more than 87,000 persons have passed the exam--a pass rate of approximately 44 percent. The test was originally intended to serve the "bright but bored," who may be performing very well in high school but wish to move on to college ahead of time, and "borderline dropouts," marginal attenders and achievers who nevertheless have or can gain (before taking the test) a sound command of the basic skills and who are disaffected with conventional schooling.

Presented in this paper is a summary of the six years since the test has been implemented. Discussion centers on a number of important factors: a longitudinal view of examinee characteristics, long-term institutional reaction to the exam, changing test characteristics, and the relationship of the CHSPE to other testing programs.

Background

During the 1975-76 school year, the California Department of Education implemented the California High School Proficiency Examination (CHSPE) in accordance with legislative mandate (Section 48412 of the California Education Code). The optional, four-hour examination provides an opportunity for eligible persons who are proficient in the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic to have that proficiency verified. The CHSPE is given three times each school year in November, March, and late May or early June. Results are reported approximately six weeks after each test.

The State Board of Education awards each examinee who passes the CHSPE a Certificate of Proficiency, which is equivalent by California law to a high school diploma. The United States Civil Service Commission also accepts the Certificate of Proficiency as fully equivalent to a high school diploma for purposes of civilian employment with the federal government. (The military services' policies on the Certificate of Proficiency have varied from one branch to another and from one time to another. Generally, the military accords passage of the CHSPE the same limited-equivalency status as passage of the General Educational Development [GED] exam, except that the Air Force, for example, accords passage of the CHSPE the higher status of full parity with high school graduation.)

Section 48412 of the California Education Code allows any person who is 16 or older on the day of the examination to take the CHSPE. Persons younger than 16 years also may take the CHSPE if they (1) have completed a year of enrollment in the 10th grade, or (2) are in the second semester of the 10th grade on the day of the exam. State law does not require any applicant to have parental permission to take the test and does not permit local school officials to require such permission. Also, state law does not permit an examinee who passes the test to leave school before the examinee has reached his/her 16th birthday and has presented verified parental permission to leave. By California law, students must normally attend school until age 18 or high school graduation. Public schools are required by state law to distribute annual CHSPE announcements (supplied by the state) to each 11th and 12th grader.

The California State Department of Education has sole responsibility for development and content of the CHSPE. Educational Testing Service (ETS) through its Berkeley, California, western office, administers the exam

throughout California at about 100 test centers. The Department of Education maintains permanent records of the names of those who pass the exam. In addition, a state administrative regulation requires that if a certificate holder is a student in a public school district, the district shall enter the award of the certificate on the recipient's official school transcript.

The skills measured in the CHSPE are those basic skills in reading, writing, and computation taught in California's public schools. These skills are measured by a paper-and-pencil examination consisting of approximately 200 multiple-choice questions and two essay questions set in the context of adult day-to-day living experiences. The exam is not intended to predict how well a person would perform in an academic setting, except insofar as a sound command of the basic skills is prerequisite to such performance. It is not the intent of the CHSPE program to provide a profile of strengths and weaknesses for each person who takes the test, and the actual test instrument is not designed to do so. No individual profiles, numerical scores, or other comparative test results are provided; test results are reported as "pass" or "not pass" only.

Examinee Characteristics

Padia (1977) pointed out in his study of the first test cohort that many of the examinee attributes which emerged after the first administration have remained relatively constant. Padia suspected that the first administration examinees (December 1975) differed from subsequent examinees for the simple reason that the "novelty" of the first adminstration attracted the informed, bright, assertive, achievement-oriented student who found the CHSPE to be a way of validating his/her skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Many of the first cohort students did not choose to leave school, because the school environment provided them with the opportunity to demonstrate their success in

the safe confines of the school, and took the exam as much out of curiosity as for any other reason.

A few of the student characteristics that have remained relatively constant are:

- Slightly more females (54 percent) than males (46 percent) take the CHSPE. This proportion has changed very little. In the first year females represented 55 percent of the examinees and males represented 45 percent.
- Not surprisingly, the pass rate among all examinees increases as a function of greater educational attainment by the examinees' parents. Stern (1979) reported in his study that the test score the examinee attained was positively associated (across all test dates) with reported educational attainment of the head of household.
- The CHSPE examinees come from homes with less education than the average California home. The examinees report nearly 50 percent of their parents achieved no more than a high school diploma. This percentage can be contrasted to that reported by the California Assessment Program (CAP) in the 1980-81 CAP Annual Report: 35 percent of California's twelfth grade students have parents who have achieved no more than a high school diploma.
- The majority of CHSPE passers (80 percent) respond on a pre-test questionnaire that they will leave school earlier than they otherwise would have as a direct result of passing the CHSPE. Nearly two thirds of the examinees in Padia's study reported that they were motivated to a great extent to take the CHSPE in order to gain

the option of leaving school early.

- Nearly 70 percent of the examinees who leave school as a result of passing the CHSPE report they are planning to enroll in a community college.
- Nearly 60 percent of the examinees who pass the CHSPE and subsequently leave school, report they plan to attend a university or four-year college at some future time.
- Nearly 50 percent of all passers report they are currently employed while still attending school, and nearly 45 percent work more than 30 hours per week. More than half the passers also report they plan to work full time soon after leaving high school.
- Approximately 70 percent of the passers report they are not active in school programs such as music, publications, athletics, clubs, student government, or dramatics. This pervasive lack of involvement of the examinees in school programs seems to lend evidence to the observation that the examinees find little to attract them to high school.
- The majority of CHSPE examinees are in the 11th grade when they take the exam. The pass rate for 11th graders is also higher than examinees in the 10th or 12 grade. The incentive to leave school early is much stronger for this group of students, who see the value of entering either college or the workforce a full year early. The nearly 25 percent of the examinees who are in the 12th grade tend to take the test in the fall, since there is relatively little pay off for a student to take the CHSPE in the spring

of his/her senior year, unless it is clear he/she will not graduate.

There are, however a few significant changes in the characteristics of the CHSPE examinees that have occurred between the first year of the test and the present:

- Slightly more males than females are passing the CHSPE. Before March 1978, the female pass rate was 43 percent and the male pass rate of 38 percent. Since March 1978, the average female pass rate is 46 percent and the male pass rate of 47 percent. (Some possible reasons for this shift will be discussed in the section on changing test characteristics.)
- Minority examinees since the first year have improved their passing rate on the CHSPE. Black examinees have increased their pass rate by 58 percent while Hispanic examinees have increased their pass rate by 40 percent. (White examinees have increased their pass rate by 21 percent.)
- The majority (75 percent) of examinees now report themselves as white, while approximately 10 percent report themselves Hispanic and about 5 percent Black. These percentages are a significant increase in minority examinees from the first year in which the examinees reported themselves about 87 percent white, 2 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Black.
- The majority (65 percent) of the examinees attend regular daytime

high school, 15 percent attend a continuation high school,* and almost 15 percent are not attending high school when they take the CHSPE. The other 5 percent attend parochial or private schools. The pass rates among these three groups have remained relatively constant, with examinees in regular high school having higher pass rates than students in continuation high school or those students not attending school. However, there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of CHSPE registrants who are not attending school.

In summary, the CHSPE examinee has changed very little since the first administration. Some exceptions are that males pass at a higher rate than females, the number of minority examinees has increased, and more examinees report that they are not attending school at the time of the exam. The "typical" CHSPE examinee is in the 11th grade, non-minority, dissatisfied with his/her high school experience, and currently enrolled in a daytime high school. He/she will probably leave high school after passing the CHSPE and go to work at least part time. The majority of students who leave high school after passing the CHSPE will attend a community college and at some time in the future plan to attend a four-year college or university. Most plan to be working full time in the near future.

Institutional Reaction

In order to understand the reactions of the schools during the early years of the CHSPE program, it is helpful to know some background information on the

* Continuation high school is a mandated system of alternative education in California. Continuation education is (Padia 1977) "a program that leads toward a high school diploma, prepares its students for entrance into occupational training and provides schooling which, accompanying employment, can contribute much to the individual's immediate and long-term interests." The program serves those students who do not attend regular full-time schools. It also provides for students who have special problems and offers an individualized program of instruction for each student.

California political scene.

In the early 1970's, schools and other government agencies sought to create some legitimate alternatives which would allow students to have more of a choice in deciding the type of educational experience that would best suit their individual needs. In 1972 the California Legislature voted to create an early-graduation option for high school students. The Legislature directed the California State Department of Education to design an examination to measure what students should know before leaving high school. The resulting instrument was the CHSPE.

The original proponents of the CHSPE expected the exam to appeal in part to "bright but bored" students. However, Stern (1979) found that such students were not merely bored, but also informed, achievement-oriented young people anxious to obtain a high school diploma in order to get a good job, to go on to college, or to compete in the world.

One of the major concerns of California's teachers and school administrators in the first year was that the CHSPE would cause a "mass exodus" of students from California's high schools, adding to the already high teenage unemployment rate, and, more important, reducing the state funding to school districts through the potential loss of large numbers of pupils passing the CHSPE. As it happened, there was no mass exodus; in fact, the test produces barely a trickle of students leaving high school early from any one district. Of the more than half a million students each year who are eligible to take the CHSPE, only about 30,000 take the exam. A little more than 44 percent (13,200) of these students pass the CHSPE, and about 80 percent (10,560) of these actually leave school early. The result is that each year only 2 percent of all the

eligible students in California high schools leave high school early through the CHSPE program, and these students are distributed across all 1,043 school districts in California, creating no hardship for any one district. During the last few years, as a result, the school's attitude toward the CHSPE has gone from deep concern to acceptance of the program by most school administrators as a valuable option for a few individuals.

But what effect have these few student losses had on the finances of California's 1,043 school districts? To say the least, the structure of public school finance in California, involving both state and local funds raised and expended pursuant to state law, is quite complex and is accordingly beyond the scope of this study. It is important to note, however, that the state of California realizes a saving to its General Fund of several million dollars annually in per-pupil aid to high schools for students who leave school early through the CHSPE program. The loss of state and local aid to school districts is minimized in the case of every individual district, since the chances of any one district losing vast numbers of students due to the CHSPE program is nil.

As mentioned earlier, the Armed Forces generally make little distinction between the CHSPE and the GED; however, military policy on this subject is complicated and changes frequently. All colleges and universities in California, on the other hand, are required by State law to accept the Certificate of Proficiency as a legal equivalent to a high school diploma for admissions requirements. Employers in California are also required to accept the Certificate of Proficiency as a high school diploma, and there is no evidence to suggest this requirement has met significant resistance.

In summary, the CHSPE program is generally accepted by social institutions as a legitimate option to regular high school graduation. The bonus from the State's perspective is that it saves several million dollars in state aid each year.

Changing Test Characteristics

Since the first year of the CHSPE, there have been a number of significant changes in administrative procedures. Some of these changes are:

- In 1976 the CHSPE program was opened to adults of all ages. Until that time state law permitted only persons 16 or 17 years of age to take the examination.
- An exception to the minimum age requirement (16 years old) was added to the regulations to provide that students who are younger than 16, but who have completed or are enrolled in the second semester of the 10th grade on the day of the exam, are eligible to take the CHSPE.
- The superintendent of each high school district is required to distribute to each student in the 11th and 12th grades an announcement explaining the CHSPE and the dates the test is administered.
- Recently, the California Legislature increased the registration fee for the CHSPE from $10 to $20. As an apparent result of this dramatic fee increase, the November 1981 administration, the first test following the increase, was the smallest in the program's six-year history (reversing the previous trend of steady growth), with 30 percent fewer registrants than on the same date in the preceding year. Early registrations for the March 1982 test date are also running about 30 percent behind last year. The Department

is considering rolling back the fee increase in 1982-83 to $15, in an attempt to bring the number of test takers back up to prior levels and not deny the option of the "early exit" exam to individuals who cannot afford the fee increase.

In addition to the administrative changes that have occurred since the first year there have been a few changes in the characteristics of the test. A major change from the original test was the addition of the essay portion on the November 1976 exam.

The CHSPE includes two essay questions that are given at the beginning of the examination. Examinees are allowed 20 minutes for each essay and are encouraged to use all of the time. The essay topics, which change with each administration, generally deal with questions that concern young people in the contemporary world. The essay portion of the CHSPE is patterned after the statewide Writing Assessment of the California Assessment Program (CAP) and scored using a holistic rating procedure.

The reading and scoring of the essays takes place under the general supervision of ETS. Approximately 40 teachers from high schools and colleges serve as readers for each test, guided by more highly-experienced readers who act as question leaders and table leaders. A majority of these readers have participated in holistic readings for ETS at other times, often as readers of Advanced Placement examinations in English or of the essay portion of the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) administered in recent years by the California State University system.

The following is an example of a typical essay question, in this instance

administered on the March 1977 CHSPE:

> Write one or two paragraphs explaining why you believe physical education should or should not be required in high school.

This question is representative of "prompts" included on the CHSPE in that it directs the examinee to write a brief persuasive discussion about a current issue. (This topic was controversial in 1977 because of then-current California legislation that allowed school boards to release 11th and 12th graders from what had previously been compulsory physical education in every year of high school.)

To pass the CHSPE an examinee must demonstrate proficiency on both the objective and essay portion of the examination. (The rationale for requiring independent passage of each portion of the CHSPE is that if California is going to issue the legal equivalent of a high school diploma to persons possibly as young as second-semester sophomores, then the CHSPE: (1) must verify that the examinee is at least as proficient in basic reading and computing skills as the average graduating senior; and (2) must verify that the examinee can write a simple, well-organized essay on a specific topic.) Until March 1978 females were passing the CHSPE at a higher rate (43 percent) than males (38 percent). Males have always passed the objective portion of the test at a higher rate than females, but the females consistently passed the essay portion at a higher rate than males. Since March 1978, however, the overall pass rate for males has been higher (47 percent) than the pass rate for females (46 percent). The males

have been "catching up" since 1978 to the females on the essay portion. One possible reason for change is the increased emphasis on improving writing skills in California public schools since the Pupil Proficiency Law. This law requires each local school district to design and periodically administer basic skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic) assessment to its elementary and secondary pupils. A student must pass the district test in addition to meeting course requirements in order to earn a local high school diploma.

Another significant occurrence in the last few years has been a drift toward increasing numbers of test questions directly applicable to day-to-day adult living experiences. Inasmuch as these "life-skills" items generally require both reading and computing skills, the difficulty level of these items is individually higher than the "pure" reading and (very few) straight computation items which were included on the CHSPE in earlier years (although of course the overall minimum passing score has been lowered proportionately in order to keep the "norm" constant). The test is accordingly not appropriate for diagnosing weaknesses in basic skills, since when an examinee answers a question incorrectly it is difficult to determine which skill was performed incorrectly. For example, an examinee may be asked to balance a checkbook. When performing this task, the examinee may select the wrong answer because of an inability to read or an inability to compute, or both. Mastery of a multiplicity of skills in the combinations in which they are typically applied is necessary to function day-to-day in contemporary society, and the CHSPE is designed to assess such mastery.

In short, what the Certificate of Proficiency says to a college registrar or employer is that this person does not have just abstract academic knowledge, but has mastered skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic applicable to

day-to-day living.

Relationship to Other Testing Programs

The CHSPE is the only "early exit" test available in California. There are other alternatives to conventional high school available in California, such as off-campus work experience, independent study projects, or concurrent enrollment in a college, but all these options still require the student to meet local school district course requirements.

The CHSPE should not be confused with the well-known General Educational Development (GED) examination. The GED is an all-multiple-choice, academic achievement-type exam offered nationwide "on demand" to persons 18 or older (with certain exceptions) which yields subscores for the common basic areas of high school curricula. California law provides that persons who pass the GED may obtain from the State Department of Education a Certificate of High School Equivalency which, under the statute, is required to be deemed a high school diploma only for state and local public employment (although passage of the GED is generally accepted in California and nationwide by employers and many colleges in lieu of a diploma.)

The CHSPE should also not be confused with the California Pupil Proficiency Law. As mentioned earlier, this law, which was passed in 1976 (AB 3408, Hart), requires each local school district to design and periodically administer basic skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic) assessments to its elementary and secondary pupils. A student must pass the district test in addition to meeting course requirements in order to earn a local high school diploma.

Conclusions

The CHSPE program has become institutionalized. What was once viewed as a direct intrusion into the authority of the schools has become just

another (and equally valuable) option for both students and the schools. The "steady-state" nature over the past six years of the variables related to the CHSPE program is evidence of stability and institutionalization.

In spite of rumors to the contrary, schools have attracted and continue to attract (social factors are clearly not unimportant) all but a few students. The students who take the CHSPE are sufficiently sophisticated to use the system to explore options to a regular high school diploma.

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